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Enclosed are 5 copies of an article by Joan Borsten on the problems of the Black Hebrews of Dimona, published in the Friday, December 3, 1976 issue of the Jerusalem Post. The Black Hebrew Sect has recently received a certain amount of publicity when several newspapers announced that an immigration court would soon decide on their legal status in Israel. With few exceptions these American Blacks are not recognized by the Rabbinical authorities as Jews according to religious law (Halacha). They entered the country for the most part as tourists. The Embassy has now been informed by the Ministry of Interior that any further decision regarding their status will be postponed indefinitely out of concern for possible international reactions. However, an as yet unresolved question pertains to the status of some 60 members of this Sect who have renounced their American citizenship and are thus stateless. It is not clear whether Israeli reticence regarding this issue will also apply to them. The article is informative as to the life and problems of this group and thus may be of interest to the Department.

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SECT PROBLEMS

(Photo: Judah Passov)



A group of a few hundred people from the United States who proclaim that they intend to take over the State of Israel on September 22, 1977, cannot be regarded as a serious political or security threat to this country. But the Black Hebrews, who have settled mainly in Dimona, are beginning to be a social problem which the authorities won't be able to evade much longer. JOAN BORSTEN reports.

Hebrews of Dimona. Arad and Mirpe Ramon is that no one in the Government seems to have enough courage to make a decision as to their future - says one Dimona resident. "They should either be made permanent residents, like many other non-indigenous non Jewish groups or they should be deported as crackpots whose messianic visions will probably cause harm to innocent people."

Their story begins seven years ago. In November, 1959, when a group of 88 American Blacks appeared before customs officials at Lod Airport. They called themselves Black Hebrew Israelites and, claiming that their ancestors were exiled from Israel some 4,000 years ago, asked to be admitted to the country under the Law of Return (which at that time stated that anyone who is a Jew or a member of a Jewish family is entitled to immigrant rights).

Yehudit Hiner, of the Interior Ministry, remembers that the Government was unsure what status to give the group.

"Most of them were women and children who had no financial resources. They told us that they had 'come home to be free and not slaves in America.' They claimed to have been thrown out of Liberia and they had no visas."

"We decided to give them temporary housing and the three-month visitor's visas, automatically granted to anyone carrying a U.S. passport, until an investigation could be made."

IN DIMONA, a town experienced in absorbing different kinds of people from various backgrounds, the exotic "Black Jews" were welcomed with open arms. The children were admitted to schools and jobs were found for the adults in the local textile mills. It was also discovered that another colony, unnoticed by the authorities, had already settled in neighbouring Arad. A former spokesman of the Absorption Ministry's Beer Sheva office has confirmed that they came in as tourists.

In March, 1970, a second group arrived, claiming to be the fathers and husbands of the Black Hebrews living in Dimona. The Government had by now completed its investigation, and decided what the local press had already discovered: the Blacks were not Jewish as Israel defines Jewish. At best they could be considered a "Mosaic sect which is close to Judaism."

Nevertheless the Government was unwilling to break up families so the newcomers were admitted as tourists but given no housing privileges. The families in Dimona took in all 70 of them which caused considerable overcrowding.

With the arrival of this new group and then another 200-300 more the love affair between Dimona and the Black Hebrews came to an abrupt end. The Blacks, now too numerous to squeeze into the 20 flats given the original group, moved into the local bomb shelters. Their rock band, which met with great success all over the country, disturbed the peace by practising until late at night. Because of the authorities' refusal to allocate more apartments, the group began what local residents termed a "hate campaign," making derogatory remarks about the "discriminatory behaviour" of Israelis and declaring that their sect of Hebrews would take over Israel as to their biblical right. An article in *The Jerusalem Post* quotes one Black as saying: "How come that white people should own the Holy Land when it is known that the original Hebrews were Black?"

WATCHED BY a television team and foreign press correspondents, 88 Black Hebrews entered a

Dimona Supermarket, filled their baskets with IL3,000 worth of food, and refused to pay. In another protest, Blacks forced their way into five vacant immigrant flats.

Then Ben-Ami, the group's spiritual leader and spokesman, declared in a national TV interview that there were between two and 10 million Black Jews in America, of whom a million were getting ready to "come home to Israel." Another Black repeated the same story and added that Israel is, in fact, their country, that the Jews in Israel are all impostors, and that only the Black Hebrews are real Jews, the Jews of the Bible.

The Israeli Government apparently did not know what action, if any, to take over the Black Hebrews. The group was obviously aware of the indecision and also of the effect that throwing them out could have on world opinion.

When they appealed to remain in the country as immigrants some members of the group renounced their American citizenship. After the Interior Ministry instructed custom officials not to let into the country additional members of the sect newcomers arrived as "pilgrims," complete with genuine round trip tickets, and "sufficient funds."

All in all, the Interior Ministry succeeded in turning a handful of Black Hebrews away at the airport and deporting 17 who were involved in a Mirpe Ramon gas station robbery and an intragroup killing.

By the time this reporter first interviewed the group in October,

1974, at least 500 American Blacks were living in a highly structured society in Dimona. They were happy, healthy, and bursting with self-respect. Parents were "educating" their children, whom they had withdrawn from the local school system. Some members of the group made jewellery and leathercraft which they were selling. Others worked at the "Live Sea," and at the local Dimona textile factories. The rock band, the Soul Messengers, was in great demand. Everyone was still living in the original 10 flats and nearby bomb shelters.

Ben-Ami, who entered the country as Ben Carter but quickly dropped his "slave" name, had developed an aura of authority, spoke in an angry, evangelical fashion, and acted like a man accustomed to deference. And his statements about the group's religious beliefs had lost their 1968 business.

"We believe in the Prophets and the Bible and the Truth in the Bible. We believe that the Bible happened just like it's written, but that there are sections which are written one way and have other meanings. We believe in and read the New Testament, and accept Jesus as one of our brothers, a teacher sent by God to teach at the appointed time."

Ben-Ami could also now recite the group's history and purpose by rote. His words were measured and spaced, and his delivery mechanical, as if he had said his piece a thousand times before and grown quite weary of it. And he managed to leave it unclear whether the "history" had evolved during their stay in Dimona or whether it had always existed but had cleverly not been enunciated until they knew the Government would not bother them.

of God that in all
world it was the
return of the Children of
rael to the Land of the Promise.

And the words came forth and
lived the people, calling them
gether in a little temple on
icago's south side. And it was
d to them that the time had
me to get up out of the land of
plicity and to begin the journey
me. In the same manner that
forefathers came out of an-
nt Egypt. "Everyone cast
de everything that they had,
d all their worldly belongings
I picked up their cross. From
re, being guided by the
phesias, they moved to LibeHa
ause just as our people, when
y left out of Ancient Egypt,
ld not enter directly into
nel, also at the end of this cap-
ty, we could not enter directly
Israel. There were certain
res of the decadent society of
erica — modern Egypt —
ch had to be cast off in the
ferness.

We understood that at the end
he mission in Liberia, the mis-
n of the Children of Israel
ld be to establish the Kingdom
Jod in Israel and bring salva-
to all men...

In 1977 the Kingdom of God
be in its glory in Jerusalem.
business is to establish the
gdom of God for the saving of
men, all the afflicted people."
fembers of the group were also
lous that, with the end of the
ld so close at hand, the truth
ut Ben-Ami should now be
de known.

The time is all ready for the
salah," said one. "If he ever
g to come, it's right now.
thermore, the Messiah is
king, talking, and li ng in the
s of Israel, going about the
iness of bringing peace
ice and mercy to this poor tick
ld. He didn't come like all the
ld expected, but he's here."

E MARCH, towards
ivation" and 1977 was about to
in in earnest. By December,
i, the Black Hebrews had
lished a manifesto claiming
"the country to the fullest ex-
t of its biblical boundaries
ngs to us."

he document, sent to a long list
international and African
isations, asked for "support
ur right to this country" and
med that "the appointed time
come."

eglarizing that Israel is located
"northeastern Africa," it
hanced that "we are not a
gious sect and we have not
rued to Jerusalem to live
ither with the European
sh Community presently oc-
ing our land."

rock concert found themselves
dancing to anti-Semitic lyrics.
Shortly afterwards, the record
company which had already
released one album for the group,
had to cancel their c ntract for
"unspecified reasons."

At about the same time, Mr.
"Abaleak Ben-Yehuda" published
a book, *Black Hebrew Israelites
from America to the Promised
Land*.

Formerly a Black Moslem
(as he claims are all the
"brothers"), Ben-Yehuda openly
blamed the plight of American
Blacks on the "Jewish power
structure," and said that the U.S.
funds given to Israel since the
Yom Kippur War had been given
at the expense of American
Blacks. He also casually men-
tioned the "mysterious dis-
appearance" of a Liberian official
who once gave the group a hard
time.

When this reporter returned to
Dimona recently, Abshalom
(speaking for Ben-Ami, who "is
not with us now but will be return-
ing") revealed that September
22, 1977, is now prophesied to be
the "end of the days." He also
predicted that there will be a
great war, to humble all nations,
and great slaughter.

AWARE THAT the colony now
numbers at least 100, all of them
here illegally, and that their
statements are becoming more
and more anti-Israel and anti-
Semitic, and that they probably
will not sit quietly at home in
Dimona waiting for the end of the
world, the Interior Ministry has
again promised a decision on
the Black Hebrews. It is most
probable, however, that any ac-
tion will be shelved once more,
because the issue is just too con-
sistive.

Deportation of the whole group
would undoubtedly mean a UN
debate, criticism from liberal
American Jews, and Christians
who think the group is
"harmless," and it would add fuel
to Arab propaganda about Zionist
racism. Besides, as was recently
pointed out in a letter to *The
Jerusalem Post*, there is no inter-
nal pressure to throw the Black
Hebrews out (except from the
Dimona and Arad
municipalities), because most
Israelis still think that the group
are Falasha Jews from Ethiopia
or Cochin Jews from India, or
Blacks from New York who have
undergone halachic conversion.

And so the Black Hebrews go on
giving concerts at Israeli wed-
dings and universities, playing
basketball at our army bases,
reinforcing their numbers (just
last week another group of Black
"pilgrims" mysteriously dis-

happened), and eagerly awaiting
September 22, 1977.

It seems that the Government is
also waiting for September 22,
1977, hoping that the Black
Hebrews will either do something
so atrocious (but not harmful to
the general population) that it will
be easy to justify throwing them
out, or that when the end of the
world doesn't come, Ben-Ami's
followers return to Chicago. □